Thales University takes berth

Thales employees exercise their creative juices

Report

Corporate universities have not been a prominent feature of the corporate training and development landscape in Australia, although most learning and development (L&D) practitioners would have heard of MacDonald’s Hamburger University, Motorola University and, perhaps, the Coles Institute. But Thales Australia is poised to show the possibilities of the corporate university with the launch this year of Thales University.

Thales Australia is part of the Thales Group, which operates in 50 countries around the world (“Thales” is pronounced as “tallus”). Thales Australia employs 3,700 people, with around $1 billion invested in local technology, research and development (R&D). It has 35 sites around Australia, with headquarters at Garden Island in Sydney. It provides services to the Australian Defence Forces as well as undertaking a range of commercial projects.

The workforce has a strong technology and engineering focus (it has 22,000 R&D engineers worldwide), and the group invests around 20% of its revenues in ongoing research and development. Thales Australia was created as part of the Thales Group in 2006, bringing Australian Defence Industries and three other Australian businesses under the Thales umbrella.

The range of Thales Australia projects includes the refitting of naval frigates at Garden Island (a $1 billion project), the development and production of the Bushmaster (the only armoured vehicle ever wholly designed and manufactured in Australia, currently used in Afghanistan), air traffic control systems (used across Australia and recently sold to Singapore), security systems (used in both defence and civil contexts), naval sonar and combat systems, electronics for aircraft, and simulators (for flight and land vehicles).

A global network of campuses

Although corporate universities are not well-known in Australia, they have made their mark on the corporate landscape in the US and Europe. Thales University in fact predates the rise of the corporate university in the US. It was established in France in 1984. With the establishment of Thales University in Australia, it operates at seven sites around the world – Jouy en Josas, near Paris, France; Crawley, near London, UK; Stuttgart, Germany; Rome, Italy; Washington DC, USA; and Hengelo in the Netherlands.

Paul Bowles is the newly appointed General Manager of Thales University in Australia. He says that establishing Thales University was an indicator to the workforce that the company took learning and development seriously and was committed to providing good quality enterprise training and education. The emphasis is on courses that are aligned to business needs rather than the issuing of qualifications.

The campus at Garden Island is part of the Thales Group’s global university network. Thales University has a global curriculum which is complemented by local content. Training is based around four strategic areas: Management & Change; Project Management and Business Process; Marketing & Sales; and Systems, Software and Transverse Technologies.

Chris Jenkins, managing director of Thales Australia, said: “Thales believes strongly in developing a centre for learning in Australia. We’re extremely pleased to be able to offer our employees access to best practice onsite and e-training courses, and work with them on their career and personal growth goals.”

An increased commitment

Thales University represents an increase in Thales Australia’s commitment to training. The number of L&D staff is increasing from two to six, the number of face-to-face training sessions is increasing this year to over 150 sessions, a large repertoire of online courses is available to employees through SkillSoft, and employees have access to the online book library, Books 24x7.

Bowles says that Thales Australia already had a strong training agenda, primarily for technical skills, and this would continue. Thales partners with a variety of registered training organisations and TAFE institutes to deliver recognised vocational qualifications. It also has a study assistance scheme to support employees in attaining tertiary qualifications. The Thales University initiative will help the company to expand its offering and contribute to the sharing of corporate knowledge. With the coming together of a number of separate businesses in Australia, Bowles says it is also important to Thales to create a common corporate culture and identity, thereby promoting common processes and supporting career development.

The Thales Group is shifting from being a multi-domestic to a truly global company, and Thales University is seen as playing "a key federating role". Bowles says this implies an increasing openness to the outside world, so that Thales University becomes "a cultural melting pot to facilitate networking". The Thales workforce is quite mobile, with employees likely to do service in different locations, not only within Australia, but...
overseas as well, especially in Europe and the US.

Thales University has already commenced delivering many of its key courses, two examples of which are - Passport to People Management and Passport to Project Management. Feedback from employees has been extremely positive. Attendees in the people management course were particularly motivated by what they felt was an investment in them personally as well as the future of the company. Attendees cited several benefits of the course, including improved communication skills and increased self-awareness.

Face-to-face sessions will be held around the country in 2008 so that all employees will have the opportunity to experience the benefits of Thales University. The Thales University brand has been marketed to the workforce through newsletters and a website where courses are publicised. Lunchtime learning sessions are conducted on Thales projects and initiatives. Some of these are course “taste testers” such as one on creativity and innovation.

Word of mouth recommendations from satisfied customers of Thales University courses have helped increase participation. Subject matter experts and managers are involved in the presentation of courses, along with external and internal trainers.

A cohesive brand

Bowles says that a lot of attention is paid to ensuring that external trainers are familiar with the company culture before they start training. “It is important that external trainers understand the Thales values and context, so they reflect that in the way they present to employees. We want to move from being a number of separate companies to being one company.”

The Thales University initiative fits into the company’s holistic approach to human resources, the motto of which is “People1st”. Professional development is a key part of the Thales values. Each employee can have a professional development discussion with their manager, which can clarify the employee’s career direction. From this comes a professional development plan. This can include assessments and a plan for training combined with individual coaching. Employees’ options also include mobility between positions, both at local and international levels, and in-job development.

Thales University supports professional development through:

- welcome sessions for all graduates
- career orientation sessions
- management leadership and technical leadership programs
- “passport” sessions to key job families

Thales has an employee life cycle approach to development. Every employee with five years’ experience may attend an orientation meeting to consider career options, and every employee with 25 years’ experience may attend a “career point” seminar. Employees can choose whether to pursue a specialist/expert career path or a people management career path.

Bowles says that Thales University has launched at a time when Thales Australia is growing, with exports playing an increasing role in the business, and new projects

“As a young person heading into the management path and gaining people management responsibilities, I welcome and appreciate all the help I can get. While I am currently studying MBA in Uni, I was hoping to attend courses that are:

- Thales-focused,
- where I can study in a Thales location for convenience, also I can go back to my office after the course or in case of ‘duty calls’
- supportive, friendly environment, where people speak freely, and share their stories to be used as case studies
- where I can meet and network with other Thales employees, and
- use this opportunity to enhance my knowledge about Thales overall.

“In addition, I would like to assess the quality of training delivery, and usefulness, so I can recommend to my colleagues, more specifically, the staff I manage, in order to reduce attrition rates, and further develop their skills.

“Thales University has exceeded all my expectations. The management courses ensured us, as managers of the future, to be the best as we can be, and equip us with tools to help us to get there, because ‘people don’t leave companies, their leave managers’.”

Jonathan Ma (Engineering Services Manager from the Security, Solutions and Services Division) who attended the “Team Management” and “Transversal Management” courses.

“I have been with THALES for 6.5 years and have done a range of courses. I also completed a lot of courses in my previous life in the RAN. I’ve always been a little reluctant to participate, contribute or offer my experiences in many courses, particularly those that involve a lot of role play...

“The ‘Passport to People Management’ course changed all that for me. The course is without the slightest doubt, a thoroughly enjoyable experience. I have never contributed more to, or feel that I have got more out of, a course in either career. It gave me enormous confidence and self-belief that I will be able to lead the team that I am about to inherit professionally and competently. As the VP of HR said at the start of our course, ‘THALES wants managers to be good managers, they want their employees to enjoy coming to work’. I fully believe this course provides all who attend it the tools and skill sets to achieve this.”

Steve McCarthy (Account Manager from the Land & Joint Systems Division)
underway that require a widening range of skills. He is excited about the possibilities for Thales University as “a new learning and development centre of excellence for the company”.

Key to the success of Thales University is the demonstrative support from the organisation. As well as increasing the direct headcount involved in Learning & Development, funding a new, dedicated training space, members of the company’s Executive Leadership Team speak on and take part in many of the Thales University Key Programs. Bowles says this kind of executive support is critical in establishing Thales University as a true business partner.

Yves Barou, senior Vice President, Human Resources, and Chairman of Thales University worldwide, said: “Training has to be seen as an investment, either to access and facilitate individual career paths or to deploy Thales’s key projects: Thales University is there to drive and promote training within the group.”

The next 12 months look to be an exciting time for Thales Australia, and for its corporate university.

Report by Glenn Martin, editor

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**NEWS: GOVERNMENT SUPPORTS THALES’ SKILLING FOR THE FUTURE**

**Friday 11 July.** Greg Combet, Parliamentary Secretary for Defence Procurement, announced Australian Government support in the order of $3.1 million for training activities at Thales Australia.

“Under an agreement drawn up through the Skilling Australia’s Defence Industry (SADI) program, Thales has committed to upskilling a total of 2,325 staff over the next three years,” said Mr Combet.

“Defence firms face stiff competition for skills that are in strong demand in highly profitable sectors such as mining and energy.

“The SADI initiative shares the responsibility for skills growth and development between industry and government, with a view to addressing the unique character of many defence-relevant skills, and the rising demand associated with the ongoing modernisation and expansion of the Australian Defence Force’s capability.”

“Thales is one of Australia’s largest defence contractors and is currently contracted to deliver against 28 Defence land, sea and air contracts.

“This new agreement represents a joint commitment on the part of Defence and Thales to spend over $18 million on defence-specific professional and technical training activities.

“Australian Government support through the SADI program will deliver an almost five-fold increase in the level of training undertaken by Thales Australia, which is more than fifteen hundred additional places over and above their normal training activity,” said Mr Combet.

Julian Elliott, Communications Coordinator at Thales Australia, said that the training will be provided through Thales University.